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[Introduction to] The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction

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The Promise of the New South

Life After Reconstruction

15th Anniversary Edition

EDWARD L. AYERS

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PREFACE

I began work on this book with a straightforward goal: to understand what it meant to live in the American South in the years after Reconstruction. The era was crucial in the history of the region and of the nation, a time when Southerners of both races confronted the aftermath of emancipation and the reassertion of control by white Southerners. The Southern economy went through wrenching change; politics witnessed desperate conflict; blacks and whites redefined their relationships to one another; farmers launched the largest electoral revolt in American history. Other, more hopeful, things marked these years as well, for they saw the birth of the blues and jazz, the rapid spread of vibrant new denominations, an efflorescence of literature. My intention was to look at these changes as a whole, to see what connections there might be among various facets of life.

Someone else's book was never far from my mind. C. Vann Woodward's *Origins of the New South* had, in 1951, established the highest standards of scholarship and craft for the field. Woodward, in a work that managed to be both innovative and synthetic, defined the questions that have preoccupied historians of the period ever since. He championed outsiders and dissenters; he punctured the pretensions of the South's self-proclaimed leaders. Because he sympathized with the underdogs, Woodward focused on the errors, self-delusion, and duplicity of the public men of the South. As he confided to a friend, "my sympathies were obviously not with the people who ran things, and about whom I wrote most, but [with] the people who were run, who were managed, and maneuvered and pushed around." Woodward's humane and ironic portrayal was, and is, as powerful as anything ever written by an American historian. But it seemed to me that other Southerners deserved attention on their own terms, that the New South held stories his perspective had not revealed.[1]

New chronologies and issues emerge when we look beyond the public realm, when we explore diaries and fiction as well as editorials and political correspondence, when we examine the decisions people confronted every day, when we

ask about the perceptions of women and black Southerners. The New South appears far newer when we measure change by paying close attention to concrete differences in people's lives instead of contrasting the region with the North's more fortunate history or the claims of Southern boosters. To say that much was new in the South is not to say that things were fine. It is to say that people throughout the social order, top to bottom, faced complicated decisions.

How could things have been otherwise? War, emancipation, Reconstruction, the return of white dominance, and depression followed one another in quick succession between 1861 and 1877. Slavery ended more abruptly and more violently in the South than anywhere else in the modern world. Politics lurched from one regime to the next between 1865 and 1877, recrimination and bitterness marking the transitions. Blacks and whites withdrew into their own houses, churches, and neighborhoods, watching each other warily. Death and separation weighed on many families. After 1877, Southerners had no choice but to create a new society, one without precedent or blueprint.

The history of the New South was, accordingly, a history of continual redefinition and renegotiation, of unintended and unanticipated consequences, of unresolved tensions. People experienced conflict within their own hearts and minds; classes, races, and partisans clashed. The New South was an anxious place, filled with longing and resentment, for people had been dislodged from older bases of identity and found no new ones ready at hand. People worried about the inability of both the young and the old to appreciate the other's concerns and hopes. People worried that the tenuous compromises and local arrangements struck between whites and blacks, rich and poor, the worldly and the godly would not hold. People remained ambivalent about the spread of commercial values and institutions, certain that the South needed to be more prosperous yet fearful that economic change would dissolve whatever stability their society could claim.

Southerners often managed to persuade themselves, despite all this, that the new era held out unprecedented promise for the region. People of both races hoped that emancipation had given the South a fresh start, a chance to catch up with the rest of the nation while avoiding the mistakes of the North. The horror of slavery, they reassured themselves, had left the South with something unique to contribute to the nation, some reservoir of character and noblesse oblige among whites, some reservoir of wisdom and faith among blacks. Many whites longed for a place where, holding unquestioned dominion, they could lead the South into stability and progress; many blacks longed for a fair chance to show their adherence to the ideals of Christianity, democracy, and enterprise. Many Southerners wanted only to be left alone to pursue whatever private comfort the New South might offer.

Historians have felt driven, for good reason, to discover the causes and consequences of the South's deep poverty and institutionalized injustice. Southerners lived with stunted economic growth, narrow political alternatives, poisoned race relations, confined roles for women, and shallow intellectual life. In the process of exploring those shortcomings, however, an unintended thing has happened: we have focused so much on the limitations Southerners endured that we have

lost sight of the rest of their lives. The people of the New South have become synonymous with the problems they faced. Southerners of both races have become reduced to objects of pity, scorn, romance, or condescension. That is not enough.

This book tries to convey some of the complexity of experience in the New South. Account books, love letters, memoirs, and sermons offer clues; computers reveal submerged patterns; photographs permit glimpses of the way things looked. The work of several philosophers, literary critics, anthropologists, and historians have suggested how such a story might be told. William James, Raymond Williams, and Pierre Bourdieu have stressed people's relentless activity and improvisation even in the face of powerful restraints. Mikhail Bakhtin has shown that many voices speak in distinct vocabularies in every society. Johannes Fabian and Eric Wolf have warned against portraying people as romanticized or disdained figures outside the flux of history. Rhys Isaac and Greg Dening have emphasized the symbolic meanings of everyday interaction.[2] The chapters of this book, in search of a more active and intimate history, often quote rather than paraphrase, show rather than describe, dramatize rather than summarize. I have not tried to maintain the narrative illusion of a seamless story, but have shifted from one perspective to another within chapters, letting the space on the page mark the disjunctions, the gaps among people's perceptions.

The stories move across the face of the South and across time. The first chapter briefly introduces motifs that recur throughout the book, calling our attention to the simultaneous evolution of politics, economics, and culture as the era began. It juxtaposes various scenes, insisting that no part of life was merely background for any other part. Like the book as a whole, the opening chapter sometimes samples the experiences of several people and sometimes dwells on individuals. The next seven chapters describe the landscape of everyday life in the New South. We eavesdrop on conversations on railroad cars and in general stores, slip in at the back of revival tents and juke joints, stand in front of the speaker's platform at political rallies, and watch lynchings from a distance. We travel to remote saw mills and coal mines, attend football games and prizefights, loiter on the corners of dusty towns and booming new cities, walk in cotton fields and along railroad tracks.

Several themes appear in the early chapters. Post-Reconstruction politics, I argue, was extremely unstable. Apparently antagonistic groups fused while erstwhile allies split; most men cared passionately about politics though government did little; black men voted in large numbers and in many combinations; women played important roles in reform efforts; politics in the North and the South bore deep similarities. Economically, too, the South was far more fluid and active than we have thought. Advertising, name brands, and mass-produced products flowed into the South in a widening current. Some capitalists in the region managed to create businesses of national and international impact. Each year, manufacturing, mining, and lumbering pulled more blacks and whites, men and women, adults and children into wage labor. Villages and towns appeared by the thousands where none had appeared before. People of both races moved restlessly through the South and often beyond its borders. Churches proliferated,

establishing a presence in private and public life they had never known before, meeting disaffection and resentment along the way. Relations among black Southerners and white Southerners embodied every tension and conflict in the region.

The three chapters beginning with "Alliances," while still arguing for contingency and multiplicity, appear in a more familiar style. They try to explain how the most important political event of America's Gilded Age, Populism, grew out of the ferment of this New South. Starting as one effort among many at self-help and self-improvement, a group called the Farmers' Alliance found itself pushed and pulled into a wide-ranging critique of the New South. The nation watched with astonishment as conservative white Southern farmers developed new visions of economics, politics, and even race relations. In Populism, rural people sought to claim a share of the New South's promise, to make a place for themselves and their children in the emerging order. The chapters devoted to the rise and fall of the Populists are in some ways the center of the book, marking the point when the transformation of Southern politics and society accelerated. After Populism, disfranchisement steadily became the law of the land, woman suffragists saw their influence subside, black people faced more constricted choices, whites in town played more important roles.

The next three chapters, exploring the cultural history of the New South, show Southerners increasingly interacting with Americans outside the region. Authors of both races struggled to sort out life in the New South for a national audience, conveying the emotional conflicts of living in this place and time. Musicians, too, mediated between the national culture and Southern tradition, adopting new instruments and borrowing new styles, reinventing music then returning it to the national mainstream. The rapid change at the turn of the century encouraged some Southerners to accept and then contribute to religious movements that spoke directly to the pressing concerns of their society. Southern culture found unprecedented energy in these years. But, as the last chapter shows, change did not displace the past or standardize the present. The South did not become more homogeneous as modern institutions worked within the region nor did it lose its distinctiveness within the nation. Differences among people and places widened rather than narrowed; violence and distrust found new sources and new expression; some Southerners tested new ways only to return to the old. But all that lay in the future when the era of the New South began.

Charlottesville
January 1992

E.L.A.